

Before I Formed You

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[0 : 00] It's a blessing to be here. I've known about this church for a long time, and it's a joy to be among you, and particularly since my old friend Kevin is a great teacher to me.

I've held him in great affection over the years. So thank you for having me to come. Let me read Jeremiah chapter 1, verses 4 to 10, which will be my text, and then I'll have you...

I gather you stand for the reading of God's Word. Listen to now to God's holy, inerrant, and life-giving Word, beginning at verse 4 of Jeremiah 1.

Now the Word of the Lord came to me, saying, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

Then I said, Ah, Lord God, behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth. But the Lord said to me, Do not say, I am only a youth, for to all to whom I send you, you shall go.

[1 : 17] And whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and break down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant. May God be praised through the reading and hearing of his holy Word.

Amen. Let's pray. Father in heaven, we thank you that we open this book. And out of it come words of life. Oh, speak to us, Lord, through your Word. Bless me as I speak. Bless us as we hear.

May you be among us. We know you will. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. By the way, I didn't say greetings from your brothers and sisters in wonderful Greenville, South Carolina, where I have the great privilege of pastoring Second Presbyterian Church.

I've been there 18 years. In fact, this week I wrap up my 18th year there. But I've long known about this church. I've known Randy as well as Kevin. And it's a joy to be with you.

[2 : 26] Well, looking at our text, I'm reminded of the French army that was commanded by Napoleon Bonaparte, which produced an astonishing number of interesting personalities, perhaps none more remarkable than Baron Jean-Baptiste de Marbeau, who was aide-de-camp to the emperor and several of his marshals.

Now, in those days, general's aides played a vital role in the command and control system of the army. That's how you communicated with your units. And they conducted missions of strategic importance.

And I remember as a young man reading the adventures of Baron Marbeau, of how he swam the Danube at its wide point to capture some Austrian prisoners and how he rode through Russian Cossacks to deliver orders to a regiment, how he stormed the walls of Radisman during a siege. An aide like Marbeau, he would have personally known the leading figures of the age. He would have had a front seat at the making of history. They were fascinating people. And I think of a person like that when I think of a prophet like Jeremiah.

Because a prophet of the Old Testament was like a Napoleonic aide-de-camp, except that his messages came from a rather higher authority than a mere emperor. Prophets conducted missions that were assigned by the Lord.

[3 : 46] They would interact with all the leading figures of the day. Jeremiah certainly did that. He prophesied during the reign of many important kings, along with some who were not so important.

He knew them personally. He spoke to them. And so we often have this popular view of a prophet as being this wild-haired person living on the fringes of society. No, Jeremiah, by any standard, was one of the leading figures of his day.

Everybody knew him. Now a Napoleonic aide was recognized by his elaborate uniform. A prophet in the Old Testament was recognized by his dramatic calling, his appointment by God, that he would speak God's word.

And the passage I've read, Jeremiah 1-4-10, is the record of his specific calling and appointment, as, as he is called here, a prophet to the nations.

And he was going to prophesy to a wicked nation, Israel. He was going to bring out a message that was largely one of condemnation and judgment. And so the Lord here gives him a vivid and unforgettable calling so that it will fortify his will in the years to come.

[4 : 56] Now the manner of the Lord's intervention indicates God's sovereign control of all of his subjects. And so did the words he spoke to Jeremiah, words that reach into eternity past.

Look at verse 5. He says, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I consecrated you. And so Jeremiah's life, we learn, was shaped by an eternal destiny, a divine calling.

I think we usually think of Jeremiah as a distraught old man, like the portrait of Rembrandt, weeping over the desolation of fallen Jerusalem.

But all that's years, decades in the future. What we see now is Jeremiah as a youth, probably an adolescent, as the Lord reveals to him his life's work, hitherto unknown to him.

And he's told that his life work was predestined in the will of God. Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. And so we learned here that before he was even conceived, Jeremiah had a relationship with the Lord.

[6 : 07] Before I formed you, I knew you. He had been in the mind of God from before the beginning. God fully knew not only who he would be, but what he was going to be.

And you may know the biblical idea of knowing involves the idea of loving. He was loved by God in eternity past. I have loved you with an everlasting love.

Those words come from this book. And the New Testament says that is true to each of you as well. In love, God predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ as sons.

Now this means that if you trust in Jesus Christ as a child of God, his fatherly love for you did not begin when you believed. Rather, from eternity, God's love has been set on you and that is why you believe.

What a thing it is to believe in Jesus Christ. Because so many things must be true of you, according to the Bible, if you believe in Jesus Christ. And one of them is that God has loved you from eternity.

[7 : 10] God does not love you because you believe. You believe because he loved you. He's sovereign in our salvation. That's what the Bible shows. You did not come into being and then God knew you.

No, he knew you forever and therefore you came into being. Now one thing this means is that God understands us better than we know ourselves.

Do you realize that? I remember when I was raising teenagers. There was a wonderful time in our lives. No, Kevin, we love our children. And I was raising teenagers. And one time one of my daughters said to me, you don't understand.

And I laughed. See, you don't know what it's like to be a teenager. I said, oh, I know better than you do. I've been young longer than you have been. I've been through all these things before.

Don't ever say to God, you don't understand me. In fact, you know, we talk to people, so many people today say, I'm trying to discover myself. My friends, if you want to discover yourself, read your Bible. You will discover, haven't you experienced this?

[8 : 08] You discover yourself on the pages of Scripture because God has known you forever. What a wonderful thing that is. Now, verse 5 does show that all life comes from God.

I formed you, he said. Now, there's natural processes for which a mother and a father produce a child, but we are all created by God. And so mothers, when your little child says to you, Mommy, where did I come from?

A very good answer is, you came from God. Kevin mentioned that my, we're about to have our first grandchild. I am much older than Kevin. Kevin's a young man, but I got married a little later.

I had children a little later, so I'm having my first grandchild. And we know, how many times I say to my son and my daughter-in-law, God is the one who will give you the child. God is the author of life. Now, this tells us, by the way, that a fetus is a human being.

And so law is declaring that human life begins only at birth so that the baby may be legally disposed of prior to birth, running conflict not only with science, but even more importantly, with the Bible.

[9 : 15] One writer says, the purpose of this passage was not written to make a comment about the current abortion debate, but it does so anyway. God's sonogram does not reveal tissue.

It reveals a person. Now, verse 5 also states that salvation results from God's eternal choosing. We call this the doctrine of election, which means to choose.

He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. Now, you were chosen and you were saved in time. I was saved at age 30. My mother nagged me to go to church. I loved my mama. I wanted to tell her I went to church. I wandered into the church where Kevin was, but he wasn't preaching. And the pastor was preaching. And by the power of the word of God, I was born again. And that happened at a certain place in time. But it happened because God had previously chosen me. This means that our assurance of salvation relies not on our choosing, not on our meriting in any way on God's eternal foundation of sovereign grace.

[10 : 20] But not only that in this passage, in fact, the emphasis in this passage is not on his salvation per se, but on his service. Here's such an insight.

It's his service. His life is also predestined. Before you were born, I consecrated you. And to be consecrated is to be set apart to the Lord and to the work the Lord has for you.

And notice that Jeremiah's consecration took place before he was born. Consecrated persons or things were reserved for the sole use of God.

And so Jeremiah was not to live on his own terms. He was to live on God's terms. He was not to chart a course of his own design, but of God's design. And that also is true of you.

What an exciting thing it is to realize God not only chose me in eternity past, but he has ordained, he has consecrated me eternally for a work that I'm going to do.

[11 : 21] I am consecrated. And yes, to be a Christian means that I am no longer the master of my fate. What an absurd thought it is. I have a master. I am the bond.

Oh, how often I think of the Virgin Mary, our dear sister, when the angel Gabriel comes to her and she's a virgin, she's going to be pregnant, the Holy One's going to be in her, and she says, behold the handmaiden of Yahweh.

And I think, how many times in my own life I've been to the place that said, behold the bondservant of the Lord. And I want to say this, what our generation needs is Christians who realize we have been called to a consecrated life.

Tell me if I'm wrong, these are not the times for a casual, half in, half out Christianity. It's not, in fact it never cuts it, but it's decidedly not true today.

What we need are Christians who realize I am a holy person, I am set apart for the service of God, I am to live for Him. That's what our generation needs and no doubt so much of the situation we find is because that has not been characteristically true of the church movement of which we are a part.

[12 : 30] Well, all Christians were chosen by the Lord in eternity past that we would live for Him and we would do so in conformity with His will. I think of that great statement in Ephesians 2, verse 10, I actually didn't come to your Sunday school class until chapter 4, so that's the reason, that's the reason.

But listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 2, 10, for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Now, Jeremiah is consecrated to the vocation of a prophet, that God's message would be delivered to him. But see, each of us has a consecration. there's work that only you can do and there's a certain glory that God's going to show through His grace that He's going to do through you.

And part of the thrill of being a Christian is learning what it is. And you start serving, here's how it works, you start serving and the Lord starts sending you down paths. I love it, I'll be sitting up in the pulpit and I'll see a young, a new believer standing at the door handing out bulletins and I go, and so it begins.

And so it begins. When I was a college professor, I used to, my first preaching was in a Baptist student union and it was always in disarray and because of the pianist.

[13 : 55] What a wonderful pianist you have. And he showed up on time. Our pianist never showed up on time. And in fact, he was often not there and every time I preached there was this chaos at the beginning of the service.

Oh, he's going to play piano. And then some months later I learned that a guy who'd been there every week was a great pianist. He never volunteered. So I asked the obvious question, dude, why did you not volunteer?

And I never forgot what he said to me. If I start serving the Lord here, he's going to send me to Africa and I don't want to go to Africa. You know where he is. You know where he is.

The dude's in Africa. Which is a wonderful place. I'd love to be a Baptist missionary. I love the place. Let me say this. It is an oxymoron to be a purposeless Christian.

You know, we're living in a generation, we have all this affluence. Why the depression? One of the reasons is there's no purpose in life. But every Christian has been delivered from that. You are a consecrated person, a consecrated woman, a consecrated man, and you discover the thrilling purpose that God has given for you to make your contribution to the eternal glory in Jesus Christ with infinite blessings to people you will touch.

[15:07] There is no, you are not a purposeless Christian. You are to be purposeful. God consecrated you under this. Andrew Dierman writes of a man who was born out of wedlock and he was rejected by his father and mother.

What a terrible thing that is. And of course, he soon entered into crime and he was convicted. He went to prison, but there was a church there that had an evangelistic outreach to the prison. He heard the gospel and he believed.

And he began studying the Bible and the Lord opened doors for him to be a Bible teacher to his fellow prisoners. And this realization opened up and healed deep wounds in his heart.

Dierman writes, how many are like this today? He says, see, this meant to him that God wanted him even if his parents didn't. And there was a purpose, there was meaning, there was value to his life. And God had given him a calling. There was a place for him. There was a consecration. The man didn't get out of prison. Didn't need to get out of prison. He was saved and he was living unto God.

[16:10] My friends, that's our calling. Well, young Jeremiah gets his calling by direct revelation. Verse five, I appointed you a prophet to the nations. Now the prophets revealed God's word to the people by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

And we usually think of prophecy being prediction of future events. And they do that. But what they mostly do is they preach. They foretell more than foretell. And in times of great infidelity like those in which Jeremiah lived, they delivered the news of God's judgment.

And they brought what theologians call the covenant lawsuit to the people who'd broken the old covenant threatening God's judgment as a result. Now Jeremiah didn't volunteer or pursue this calling.

He wasn't an ambition of his. He was appointed by the Lord. Christopher Wright writes, Jeremiah is not a driven man but a given man. It's not a task he chose but a task God chose for him.

And I think we rightly take this as a paradigm for the calling particularly of ministers of the gospel. That it's not something you set out to do. It's not an ambition. It's something you're called to.

[17:22] I always tell young men, if you are able to do anything else, go do it. That's not to devalue the office. It's actually to value the office because I know firsthand that if you're called to it, you're going to do it.

And you're like, Jeremiah will be later. In fact, in this chapter, I can't not speak. I must preach. It's a divine compulsion. Jeremiah was consecrated a prophet and those called to preach and teach the Bible are set apart to the essential ministry of proclaiming the word of God into the darkness of a sinful world and often the darkness of a sinful church.

Now, the Old Testament prophets had in common not only this definite appointment from God, but they also tended to respond in the same way, namely with alarm and horror.

I think of Isaiah. He complained about his corrupt nature. I am a man of unclean lips. I come from a people of unclean lips. Isaiah 6.5. Gideon. He objected. He was the least in his household.

He was from the weakest clan in all Israel. I think most similar to Jeremiah and my personal favorite was Moses' reaction at the burning bush. What I'm about to say, I'm actually reading from the Bible.

[18:38] Oh, Lord, please choose someone else. Don't you love that? There's Moses. Can't you find somebody? Have you ever prayed that, Lord? Choose someone else.

Please send someone else. Well, Jeremiah, in verse 6, ah, Lord God. See, he's recoiling because he thinks himself unsuited. Verse 6, behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.

Now, a prophet's supposed to be a good, you know, speaker, a preacher. And Jeremiah's short resume does not include anything that suggests his qualification. If you're going through LinkedIn, looking for a prophet, you're, it says nothing for 12-year-old Jeremiah.

That's what's going on there. And it was the old men who spoke in the village assemblies of Anathoth. And he had no opportunity to even know if he had gifts to preach.

And it was hard to know if anyone would take him seriously. Well, the Lord had an answer which also addressed our objections when our calling to service comes.

[19 : 40] In short, what mattered was not the ability or the experience of the one who was called, but the faithfulness and power of the God who did the calling. That's true for you.

And God puts you in this situation. You go, oh, Lord God. It doesn't matter how weak you are. It doesn't matter that you're a new believer. It doesn't matter that you're young. It doesn't matter that you're old.

What matters is the faithfulness and power of God who set you there and who consecrated you under this. Don't say, I'm only a youth. That's a good word for the young people here.

Young people can serve and even speak in an important way so long as they back it up with faith and godliness. I want to encourage young people to take a lead in the word of God and in the ministry of the word.

Well, the reason Jeremiah could and would fulfill the calling was because the Lord was sending him. To all to whom I send you, you shall go. He was just simply going to, this is us too, he needed to trust that the Lord knew his business.

[20 : 45] Do you trust that the Lord knows what he's doing? He knows his business. The details have been decided in eternity passed by God. moreover, Jeremiah's speaking ability was not the issue.

It was not his words but it was going to be God's word that he would speak. Whatever I command you, you shall speak. Here's a good word for young mothers wondering how am I going to raise Christian children with God's word.

How's New City Fellowship going to impact your part of Chattanooga with God's word because God is faithful by God's power. And that's what he says, whatever I command you, you shall speak.

And that's a similar thing the Lord said to Moses when he objected. Apparently Moses had a speech impediment but God said, I will be with your mouth.

I will teach you what you shall speak. Jeremiah, let me put it this way, he did not have to be skilled in crafting public addresses. He had a great speech writer, namely the Holy Spirit.

[21 : 42] So do we. Well these features of Jeremiah's calling are replicated in the life of God's servants today. particularly preachers who select neither the recipients of their message nor the message itself.

Jeremiah was not being told to pick the specific target audience he thought would be receptive. He was not challenged or asked to craft the kind of message that he thought would be palatable.

Today the purported prophets of church success, they advise pastors to target a specific demographic and then to cater to the preferences of that demographic and then to shape their messages based upon a sociological analysis of their audience.

But God, see, he tells his true servants to speak to all kinds of people and to proclaim his word whether or not it seems likely to be received.

In fact, often it is not likely to be received. Paul said the same thing in 2 Corinthians 4, he said, we refuse to practice cunning or tamper with God's word but by the open statement of truth we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

[22 : 55] There's the minister. When Paul parted from the Ephesian elders he said to them, I did not shrink from declaring you the whole counsel of God. This is why your pastor does things like long studies through a book of the Bible because it's the Holy Spirit's agenda.

It's a great thing as a pastor not to sit there on Monday and go, what do I feel like talking about? That's a dangerous thing. But you begin by going, okay, what's the Holy Spirit saying in the next passage?

And then you deliver the word of God to them. Now this is going to come at a cost. What Christopher Wright says about Jeremiah's calling is true for all who faithfully preach God's word. Listen to this. He is going to stick out like a funeral director at a wedding. Just let that sink in a little bit. He is going to say things that people think are inappropriate.

We wish you wouldn't say that. Can't you just be quiet? Don't you realize? And you go, when is the right setting to tell people they are under the judgment of God because of sin?

[23 : 56] Which they are. And somebody has got to tell them and there is never a time to say it and it's never going to go well. Well, it is never going to be popular. It will lead to salvation in many cases. But he is to stick out like a funeral director at a wedding and it's clear that already in his mind he is going, oh man, I am going to have a terrible life.

And God says, do not be afraid of them. See, there it is. Do not be afraid of them. Yes, his faithfulness to God will come at a high cost. Your faithfulness to God's word will come at a cost to you.

Do not be afraid of them for I am with you to deliver you declares the Lord. And the book of Jeremiah will reveal, I'll study the book of Jeremiah. It's a wonderful book and he goes through many and severe trials and yet God proves that promise.

In fact, the book ends with the greatest calamity of the Old Testament, the fall of Jerusalem, the burning of the temple and yet the Lord delivers Jeremiah. Now, that's all in the future but we're seeing here that God does not promise us that we are immune from difficulties, that there will be resistance.

Many of you converted in families and your families want you not to bring it up. I was the first convert in my family and it's a little awkward to say, well, I realize I'm a sinner and I'm saved by grace alone and I want to encourage you and I got it back to me, how dare you call us sinners?

[25 : 17] Well, I say it in love and we have to say the truth of the word of God and the gospel and God does not promise us there will be no price to be paid. He promises that he will preserve us as he did Jeremiah.

Well, this promise is extended to all of God's people. I often thought of Hebrews 13, 5 to 6. I will never leave you nor forsake you the Lord promises so we can say with confidence the Lord is my helper.

I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? Well, the book of Jeremiah stands as a monument to God's faithful care over all people who consecrate their lives to him.

Again, what we need in our generation is not part-time Christians, not part-way Christians, consecrated followers of the Lord Jesus and the Lord will be with you. He's promised in his word.

Well, today when a man is consecrated to ordained minister we lay hands on him. It's our way of symbolizing the blessing of the spirit, the conferring of sacred office. But when in the end Jeremiah becomes a prophet he gets something he's by the way he's alone there is no one there to do it.

[26 : 26] And so the Lord look at verse 9 this is wonderful. The Lord reaches out his hand and he touches the member that Jeremiah is going to use in serving him.

The Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And then here's the message. Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. And so Jeremiah will be able to speak because God will give him words. but he must speak the Lord's message only. Not what the audience wanted to hear. Not even what he himself wanted to say. Ministers have to discipline ourselves.

My opinion means nothing. I'm to stand in the pulpit. I'm to preach the text of the word of God in the spirit of God delivering the message of the Holy Spirit. John Calvin made this the hallmark of a true ministry.

He said, let us then know that whatever proceeds from the wit of man ought to be disregarded. For God wills this honor to be conceded to himself alone. He will be heard in his church.

[27 : 32] It hence follows that none ought to be acknowledged that God's servants except those through whom God speaks who invent nothing themselves who teach nothing according to their own fancies but faithfully deliver what God has committed to him.

Now on those terms the Lord says in verse 10 see I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms. When a minister speaks God's word even kings and presidents may be commanded to listen.

Jeremiah is not being granted sovereignty. He's speaking for the one who is sovereign and so do we. Well, so much of the pain that Jeremiah suffers in this book is going to arise from the task the heavy task of giving a message of rebuke for sin.

Do you realize that our generation needs to be told this? It's not unloving to tell people that there's a judgment coming that there's a holy God and we are are we a wicked generation we are a wicked generation and we need to repent before a holy God because he will judge if we love people we will

tell them that and then we'll tell them about the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ which by the way sometimes I'll be thinking about this the things that I believe and I realize no wonder they think I'm crazy.

I believe that history is going to end when the heavens part and the Son of Man is going to come on the clouds of glory and that's true by the way I believe it because of the word of God but I'm not surprised that they think I'm crazy but we preach and God says I will make your preaching powerful I will cause them to hear and he says your job will be to tear down and then to root down and then to replant and Jeremiah's ministry it's a very most so much of the book is tearing down there must be a tearing down and then he says but see I'm going to I'm going to out of that new soil I'm going to have a fresh planting of grace you know how many times in our own lives catastrophe strike we go through situations that we've read it but we learn later it was God clearing away the rubble for a new day of grace in us well let me wrap it up by saying this despite many similarities ministers today are not Old Testament prophets and yet when I bow my head each week asking God's grace in preparing my sermons asking him for insight and wisdom and faithfulness and courage

[29 : 56] I am humbled and awed to know that I pray to the very same God who appointed Jeremiah a prophet long ago and when you parents are trying to raise your children this generation you need you know you need power and you cry for help you're praying to the same God to whom Jeremiah cried a God who's proven his faithfulness and power to us and my friends we must speak we must speak in our homes we've got to read the Bible in our homes we've got to disciple our children we've got to invite people to the church one thing I know about Chattanooga is that Chattanooga like Greenville needs Jesus Christ and here you have a church a pastor who preaches the Lord Jesus bring them I have a deal with my congregation a simple deal you bring a visitor to church I will preach Jesus to them fair enough right you bring them to church you want to encourage me after the service nice words I do appreciate them but what really encourages me in my church is pastor I'd like you to meet my neighbor who's at church today for the first time it's the spirit of God upon a consecrated church

I don't know anything about your situation but the answer to your challenges as a church is a consecrated congregation in the power of the Holy Spirit who prays to the same God who spoke to Jeremiah and he says I put my word in your mouth do not fear do not fear Jeremiah had a daunting call and so do you go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all that I've commanded you that's a big job but he gives us the same promise I'll close with this behold I am with you even to the end of the age Father in heaven I pray your blessing on the preaching of your word today and Father we look back on Jeremiah's incredible life but he's not alive today Father we are the ones who are alive today and Father we want to say with him ah Lord God you mean it's us but Father you're the same sovereign God you're the same God of grace and power and you have placed each of us in neighborhoods in families in workplaces there's people around us who are perishing because they do not know the good news and there we are and there's other ways in which we serve together as a church

Father cause everyone here today to realize I am a consecrated person that they would resolve to live for you wholeheartedly and that their lives would be infused with an eternal purpose to the praise and glory of your grace in Jesus name oh bless this church I pray in Jesus name amen amen Amen.